



Senate Republican Office of Policy

Briefing Report

Air Quality

May 24, 2006
Report Number REE-
05-06

Clearing the Air on California's Air Quality

The behavior of environmental special interests and their allies in the Legislature would suggest that air quality throughout California is getting progressively worse. One might come to this conclusion based on the statements they make and legislation they pursue. Currently, they are proposing to increase penalties on businesses for emitting pollutants and seek to put more emphasis on building mass transit rather than the roads Californians will actually use.

Much of the blame for the alleged worsening of air pollution has been laid at the wheels of the automobile. Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez summed up the strategy when he stated, "We've got to start changing the culture – we want to get people out of their cars and onto light rail or buses." (Source: 3/11/06, Sacramento Bee)

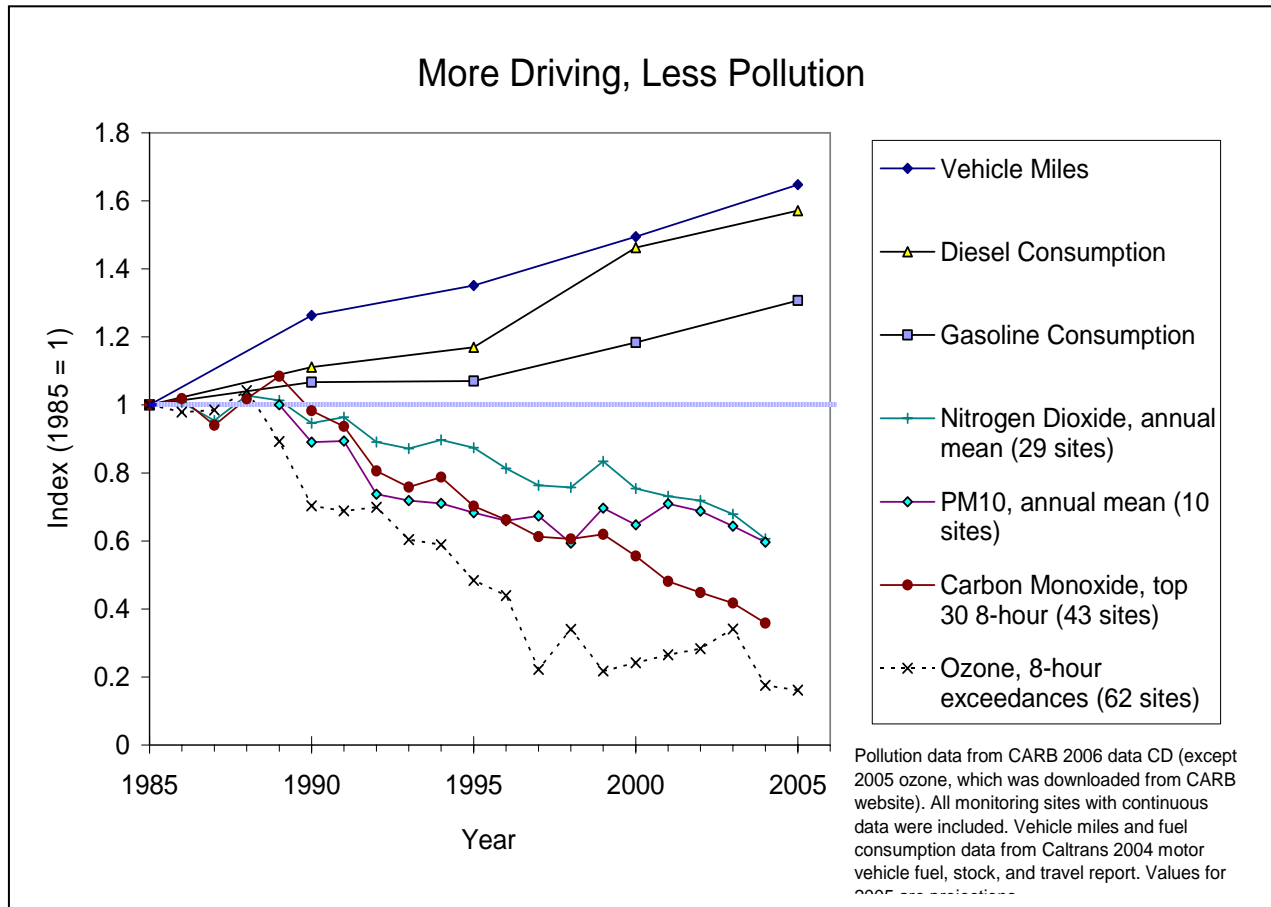
Is this change necessary? Is the air really getting dirtier? This briefing paper will explore these questions.

Automobiles are Getting Cleaner

According to California Air Resources Board data, automobile tailpipe emissions of carbon monoxide have been reduced 96 percent since the 1960s.

This trend is amplified by Joel Schwartz, who holds a master's degree in planetary science from the California Institute of Technology and currently serves as a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He wrote a research paper for the Heritage Foundation entitled "The Social Benefits and Costs of the Automobile." Mr. Schwartz explains that air pollution continues to decline because cars – including SUVs and pickup trucks – have been getting cleaner much more quickly than vehicle miles driven have increased. For example, on-road trend measurements show that the average car's pollution emissions are dropping about 10 percent per year as the fleet turns over to more recent models that start out and stay cleaner than their predecessors. Mr. Schwartz indicates that fleet turnover is reducing auto pollution more each year than \$20 billion in transit investments would produce during the next 25 years.

He assembled a chart (below) using data from the California Air Resources Board and CalTrans, which demonstrates that in California as vehicle miles have increased air quality has improved.



Not only are advancements in automobiles helping clean the air, but they can also help the jobless find employment. A recent U.C. Berkeley study of people in a welfare-to-work program in Los Angeles concluded that owning an automobile increased by 12 percent the likelihood that participants would land a job. Another study by U.C. Berkeley indicates that boosting minority car ownership rates to the same level as non-minorities would eliminate 45 percent of the black-white employment gap and 17 percent of the Latino-white employment gap. (Source: Heritage Foundation)

Examples of Air Quality Advancements

While there is much evidence that the air is getting cleaner, not dirtier, consider the following specific examples that illustrate this point:

- According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, California's air quality has not gotten worse. From 1993-2002, air quality trends in California's 23 Metropolitan Statistical Areas indicate that none of them had an upward pollution trend – they have all either remained the same or had a downward trend.

- When the U.S. EPA studied the metropolitan areas that improved their air quality the most throughout the country, five of the top ten were in California. In a study entitled, "Top Ten Improvements in the EPA's Air Quality Index," whereby the 12-year span of 1980-1991 is compared with the 12 year span of 1992-2003, the top four most-improved regions were Los Angeles/Long Beach, San Diego, Riverside/San Bernardino, and Orange County. Sacramento ranked as the sixth most improved.
- On April 25, 2006, the California Air Resources Board announced that the San Joaquin Valley no longer violates federal health standards for dangerous dust, soot, and chemical specks.
- According to California Air Resources Board data, as compiled by the Pacific Research Institute (PRI), the number of days that the eight-hour ozone standard in Los Angeles has been exceeded during the last 30 years has plummeted from 201 days in 1975 to 75 days in 2005. And that is just the highest-pollution areas of Los Angeles.
- PRI also points out that automobile emissions have fallen so far that in California's Central Valley, which has the second-highest ozone levels in the nation, cattle are now a larger source of volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions than cars. It is not clear exactly what emissions-control technology could be applied to cows.

Additional Resources

On May 17, the Senate Republican Policy Office released a report entitled, "Transportation in California," which highlights the wasteful nature of taxpayer support for public transit and complements this report on air quality.

There are many other statistics and sources that can rebut the premise that our air quality is getting worse. Numerous articles written by Joel Schwartz may be accessed by searching for his name at www.tcsdaily.com. Each year, PRI releases its "Index of Leading Environmental Indicators." Their 2006 edition was published in April and can be found, along with the organization's other research, by visiting www.pacificresearch.org.

For more information on this report or other Environmental Quality issues, contact Greg Maw, Senate Republican Office of Policy at 916/651-1501 or greg.maw@sen.ca.gov